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Selected News Release

Boys Literacy Research Featured in New Book Challenges Traditional Teaching

ORONO, Maine – As national debate continues over the adequacy and fairness of educational programs and policies affecting girls and boys, there is no question that the widest current gender gap for learning achievement recorded by standardized measures is in the area of literacy. A growing research base has established that while the shortfall in girls' science and math achievement is improving across all socioeconomic classes, boys' scores on reading and literacy are far below those of girls and continue to slide. Further, many popular media accounts characterize boys as being in trouble, both in school and in other areas of their emotional and social lives.

But wait a minute. There's more under the surface of this broad-brush painting of the perceived plight of boys, according to a collaborative new study by literacy professors Jeffrey D. Wilhelm of the University of Maine and Michael W. Smith of Rutgers University.

Concerned about the consistent reports generalizing boys' social and academic shortcomings, the researchers set out to take a closer look at the controversy from a different view. Their goal was to consider individual differences and ways that schools can help boys – and benefit girls – not to determine more quantitative averages to fuel the gender war. While offering a more optimistic perspective of the generalized problem with boys, the findings present a profound challenge to American schooling, the traditional teaching of English and to the preparation of teachers.

By following a diverse group of adolescent boys and examining their favorite activities, as well as their attitudes toward reading, Smith and Wilhelm connected what boys like to do and how their literate behavior plays into those interests. What they found was a total disconnection between in-school and out-of-school literacy. Boys considered to be problem or highly reluctant readers in the classroom had very rich literate lives outside of school and used various forms of literacy to pursue their interests and goals.

Wilhelm and Smith are detailing their findings and recommendations for schools in a book titled *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, due out March 9 from Heinemann. In his forward to *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, national literacy expert Thomas Newkirk of the University of New Hampshire, calls the work "profound and compelling" and raising powerful questions about the ways reading is taught in secondary schools.

The book will provoke some people, Wilhelm predicts, explaining that not only does the work break with established instruction in most English classrooms, it cuts across political lines in the girls vs. boys debate.

“We've just made teachers' jobs harder by suggesting that they should conceive of curriculum as inquiry, not content, and that you can't teach kids unless you know them, care about them and address them at their point of need and interest,” says Wilhelm.

The study challenges teachers at all levels to involve students' interests and the ways they use literacy at home to a greater extent, according to Smith. With the significance of social and personal relationships resounding throughout the data, the implication is particularly challenging for teacher educators, such as the researchers, he notes.

“We can teach our aspiring teacher students to devise lesson plans, instructional strategies and assessment techniques,” Smith says. “But how,” he asks, “do we teach them to care?”

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